DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 143 000 CS 203 537

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TITLE Adult Comprehension of Black and Standard English.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York City, April 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Black Dialects; Dialect Studies; Graduate Students; *Language Research; Language Variation; *Listening Comprehension; *Mutual Intelligibility; Oral English; Speech Communication; *Standard Spoken Usage; Student Teacher Relationship

ABSTRACT

This study compares the ability of 37 Standard-English-speaking graduate students to comprehend Black English versions of a set of 45 utterances with the ability of 37 comparable students to comprehend Standard English versions of the same utterances. Of the two stimulus tapes used (consisting of 45 sentences each), one was recorded in Black English and the other in Standard English. The sentences consisted of five examples each of nine features that contrast Standard English and Black English. The group of students that listened to the Standard English tape comprehended significantly more utterances than did the Black English group. Analysis of all errors made on Black English tape transcriptions, however, indicates that most comprehension difficulties were not due to inability to comprehend the contrastive feature: in 32 out of 37 cases, students who listened to the Black English stimulus tapes transcribed correctly more of the final 15 utterances than they did of the first 15 utterances, indicating an increase in comprehension with an increase in familiarity. The report concludes that a small amount of contact with a speaker may be sufficient to alleviate cross-dialect comprehension problems. (RL)

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Adult Comprehension of Black and Standard English

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A Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York City, April, 1977.

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CS 203 537

Abstract

Research investigating cross dialect comprehension has focused on children. This study compared the ability of seventy-four Standard English Speaking graduate students to comprehend Black English and Standard English versions of a set of forty-five utterances. The utterances consisted of five examples each of nine features that contrast Standard English and Black English. The group of students listening to the Standard English tape comprehended significantly more utterances than the Black English group, multivariate $f(9,64) = 13.77$, $p < .001$. Post hoc analysis showed that the between groups difference was a function of five of the nine sentence types. However, analysis of errors suggested that the between group difference on the five significant sentence types was not due to miscomprehension of the contrastive features alone.

Date submitted: January 7, 1977

Introduction

During the past decade many research studies have investigated the relationships between social class, language variations, and school achievement. Studies conducted during the establishment of early intervention programs refuted arguments that the linguistic competence of lower socio-economic group black children was inferior to that of middle class children (Baratz, 1969a, 1969b; Labov, 1972; Stewart, 1969). It was determined that the lower class black child learns a language which is just as complex and structured as the language spoken by middle class children. At the same time, the "different language" explanation (Baratz, 1969b; Cazden, 1970) suggested that the grammatical and phonological differences between Black English (BE) and Standard English (SE) might make communication difficult between BE speaking children and SE speaking teachers. Frequently, the poor academic achievement of BE speaking black children has been attributed to the BE speaker's inability to comprehend and produce the SE used in the classroom.

Comparison of the ability of black children to use both dialects indicated that the BE speaking child experiences difficulty in production rather than comprehension of SE. In a review of the literature investigating the comprehension skills of both black and white children in SE and BE, Hall and Turner (1974) concluded that no acceptable replicated research has found that the BE spoken by children presents them with unique problems in the comprehension of SE.

To date, cross-dialectical comprehension studies have focused on the comprehension abilities of children. This study investigated the compre-

hension issue from the perspective that while BE speaking children are able to understand standard English, their teachers may have difficulties understanding the BE spoken by these children. If this is the case, it may be that some of the problems encountered by BE speaking children in school result from not being understood by the teacher. A comprehension problem on the part of the teacher could manifest itself in a variety of negative teacher behaviors and/or attitudes.

The major objective of the present study was to compare the ability of the SE speaking teacher to understand the BE and SE versions of identical sets of utterances. A second concern was to examine whether comprehension varied as a function of particular features which contrast BE and SE.

Method

Subjects

Seventy-four graduate students in early childhood education (seventy-two female, two male) participated in this study. Sixty of the graduate students had taught for an average of 2.3 years in either preschools or primary grades. Twenty of the female subjects were black, the remaining were white. Subjects were stratified by race and by teaching experience with black children and randomly assigned by strata to listen to either the SE or BE tape. This resulted in two groups consisting of thirty-seven subjects each.

Stimulus Materials

Two stimulus tapes were created consisting of forty-five sentences each. One stimulus tape consisted of the sentences recorded in BE, and the other tape consisted of the same sentences recorded in SE.

The sentences were developed so that each sentence exhibited one of nine contrastive features that distinguish BE and SE (Love, 1973), with five sentences illustrating each feature. The statements averaged six words in length. The contrastive features illustrated in the stimulus tape sentences were: omission of "s" to indicate third person singulars; the formation of past tense and perfect tense; the use of the auxillary "be", negative "be", and zero copula; formation of plurals of nouns; formation of the possessive case; distinguishing pronomial features; overinflection of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs; multiple negation; and inverted word order in indirect questions.

After the BE sentences and their parallels were developed and typed, the stimulus tapes were created in the following manner:

1) The BE sentences were arranged in random order with their SE parallels in the same order.

2) Sex of the speaker was randomly assigned to each BE utterance. This procedure then determined the sex of the speaker of the identical utterance on the parallel SE tape.

3) Ten fourth grade children, five black and five white, with two girls of each race were chosen randomly to create the tapes from the fourth grade population of an inner city elementary school. The children were randomly assigned to speak the utterances as specified by sex.

4) The research workers repeated the utterances to the children who then rehearsed them until they were saying them in an easy, natural manner. When the children were able to repeat the sentences in a manner which the research workers felt was comparable to the way the sentence would be spoken in

informal conversation, the utterances were recorded. The black children recorded the BE utterances and the white children recorded the parallel set of SE sentences. The stimulus tapes were recorded with a twenty-second pause between utterances to provide time for the sentences to be transcribed.

Stimulus tapes were recorded and presented on a Panasonic Cassette Tape Recorder, Model RQ-414F.

Procedure

The graduate students in each group were asked to listen to each utterance, and write the utterance on a response sheet exactly as it was spoken. The students were instructed to then rewrite the utterance as they would say it in their own dialect. The students were informed that they would have twenty seconds between utterances to transcribe, and that they would be given additional time to rewrite sentences in their own dialect after the tape was completed. The students were given 20 minutes to rewrite sentences at this time. This latter task determined whether or not the sentence had been comprehended if the "exact" transcription was not grammatically equal to the utterance. A transcription which preserved the meaning was scored as indicating comprehension on the part of the student.

Dependent variables in the study were the total number of each of the nine sentence types not comprehended, creating nine scores for each subject.

Results

The data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance procedures.

The SE group comprehended significantly more sentences than the BE group, multivariate $f(9,64) = 13.77$, $p < .001$. Post hoc analysis with standardized discriminant function coefficients showed that the between groups difference was a function of five of the nine sentence types: Use of auxilliary "be", omission of possessive "s", pronomial apposition, multiple negation, and inverted word order in indirect questions.

Analysis of all errors made on BE transcriptions, however, yielded information indicating that most comprehension difficulties were not due to an inability to comprehend the contrastive feature.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 indicates that the percentage of incorrect responses attributable to inability to comprehend the distinctive feature was low, indicating that the students' errors were probably not in fact caused by the BE feature alone.

Discussion

Results of the study indicate that adult SE speakers have a more difficult time comprehending the utterances of children speaking Black English than of children speaking Standard English. The effect that such a problem might have on the learning situation in which the teacher speaks SE and the child BE is obvious. The child's verbal performance may be the cause of a child being assessed as "slow" or as "performing poorly", simply because the teacher is unable to accurately comprehend what the child is trying to communicate. While the multivariate analysis suggested that particular features of Black English present greater

comprehension problems than others, a closer analysis of the nature of the errors revealed that the difficulties in comprehension in most cases were not directly attributable to the particular contrastive feature examined. Approximately 60% of the time that sentences were not comprehended, it appeared to be for reasons other than the distinctive feature in the sentences. Only 10% of the time were there indications that failure to comprehend a sentence was a function of the contrastive feature. The remaining sentences were missed in their entirety. Therefore, those data do not support the contention that comprehension of BE by SE speakers is systematically affected by particular features of Black English.

It is especially interesting to note that in 32 out of 37 cases, students listening to the BE stimulus tapes transcribed more of the final fifteen of the forty-five utterances correctly than they did of the first fifteen utterances. This would seem to indicate that as familiarity with the BE dialect and/or the particular speakers increased, comprehension ability also increased. If replicated these findings would provide partial empirical support for Roger Shuy's contention that teachers in training need language laboratory experiences with dialects that are different from their own (Shuy, 1971). However, further research is needed to investigate Shuy's contention from a cost-benefit perspective. Indeed, a small amount of contact with a speaker may be sufficient to alleviate cross-dialect comprehension problems.

Table 1

Percentages of Types of Miscomprehension for

Contrastive Features that Distinguished Between Group Performance

Feature	Non CF error[a]	CF error[b]	Not Attempted[c]
Omission of zero copula	58.62	21.26	20.12
Formation of possessive case	55.46	9.00	35.54
Distinguishing pronomial features	52.50	9.30	38.20
Multiple negation	61.85	.00	38.15
Inverted word order in indirect questions	49.87	29.20	20.73

[a]Non CF errors are errors in comprehension not attributable to the miscomprehension of the contrastive feature.

[b]CF errors are errors in comprehension direclty attributable to the contrastive feature.

[c]Not attempted are errors when the subject did not understand enough of the sentence to attempt a transcription.

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